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TAGS: PREL MARR PGOV CVIS EZ

SUBJECT: CZECH REPUBLIC: AMBASSADOR'S COURTESY CALL ON FOREIGN MINISTER VONDRA

REF: STATE 181094

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Gruber for reasons 1.4 b+d.

¶1. (C) Summary: During the Ambassador's November 3 courtesy call on Czech Foreign Minister Alexandr (Sasha) Vondra, the primary topics were visa waiver and missile defense. FM Vondra expressed skepticism for the visa roadmap, but agreed to co-host the next Bilateral Consular Working Group (BCWG) meeting with the Ambassador. He suggested that the Czech Republic was likely to enter Schengen next year (ahead of others in the region) and wondered how that might impact the visa waiver process. FM Vondra confirmed continuing Czech government support for missile defense (noting a radar base would be a much easier sell than interceptors), and requested advance notice of the USG decision to help him manage public opinion. FM Vondra said a brief statement in support of missile defense at the upcoming NATO Summit in Riga would be helpful. He also agreed to consider 100% forgiveness of Iraqi debt (reftel). End summary.

¶2. (C) On the issue of visa waiver, FM Vondra said the Czechs are focused on lobbying Congress with a coalition of new EU member states. He asked whether the upcoming U.S. elections would have an impact on the visa waiver issue. (The Ambassador thought not.) FM Vondra also asked whether the debate within the EU on the admission of new EU member states into Schengen could have an impact. He explained that while the "Schengen 2" system could be delayed for years, there was a new proposal (put forward by Portugal) that would allow some of the new members to join the existing Schengen regime. He thought that the Czech Republic, together with Slovenia, were the most likely to join first, perhaps in October 2007. He said he understood Slovakia and Hungary might join at that time, but explained that for various reasons Poland and the Baltic states were not likely to join until later. FM Vondra wondered what impact this could have on U.S. thinking regarding expansion of the visa waiver program.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador responded that Schengen membership is not a criterion for the visa waiver program. He urged FM Vondra to renew the Czech commitment to the roadmap. He invited FM Vondra to co-host the next Bilateral Consular Working Group (BCWG). FM Vondra expressed skepticism about the roadmap, complaining that it has yet to show any "results," but agreed to co-host the proposed meeting.

¶4. (C) Turning to missile defense, FM Vondra said the Czech government continues to support missile defense, but asked for as much advance notice of a USG decision as possible to effectively manage public support. The GOCR will launch its public relations campaign once it knows what will be offered. FM Vondra said an offer of a radar base would be "manageable" because a referendum would probably not be necessary. He also said a brief statement by NATO allies in support of missile

defense at the upcoming Summit in Riga would help build public support. FM Vondra asked about the possible timeline of the U.S. offer, noting the Czechs will need ample time to respond (a government with a vote of confidence must approve the decision to conclude the process). Ambassador Graber said the negotiation process for a base could be lengthy.

¶15. (C) FM Vondra asked whether the U.S. has information about Russia's possible response to a base located in the region. Ambassador Graber noted that Pentagon officials are meeting with the Russians to discuss missile defense, and said the USG would aim to debrief the Czechs and Poles.

¶16. (C) The Ambassador and FM Vondra also briefly addressed the following topics:

-- Czech democracy promotion: Ambassador Graber thanked FM Vondra for the Czechs' continuing efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Cuba, Belarus, Burma and elsewhere. FM Vondra said the Czechs will continue their efforts.

-- Iraqi debt (reftel): the Czechs would consider forgiving 100% of their Iraqi debt (they have already forgiven 80%), but FM Vondra expressed concern about the precedent.

-- U.S. foreign investment: FM Vondra said he hoped to see an increase in U.S. foreign investment, in particular in the high-tech sector. Ambassador Graber said improving the climate for investment is a USG priority.

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